# WEEGEE:
## SHOTS IN THE DARK

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# WEEGEE

Weegee's photographs of New York during the late 1930s and early 1940s expose the anguish and depravity of the urban experience. As a news photographer, Weegee documented the fires, murders, car accidents, and other calamities that took place at night while the city slept. The explosion of his camera flash illuminated the dark underside of New York life for the city's upright citizens.

Although the primary intention of Weegee's work was documentary, the photographs he made for the tabloid papers betray an aesthetic consideration and psychological content that transcend the reportorial. His images focus not on the main event but on the periphery of the action, on the faces of the heroes, victims, and spectators. And he captured these people at their most vulnerable—unconscious, asleep, or absorbed in their grief and shock. ...AND THE HUMAN COP (THE HUMAN COP) depicts the concerned face of a police officer staring at the body of a female victim being carried off by a rescue worker (identified by an arm patch as a member of the Police Emergency Squad) who looks ahead toward the open ambulance doors. This criss-cross of glances creates a web of tension that moves our eye from one face to the next, a process abetted by the black void above the victim's frozen expression. Weegee, like the policeman, has trespassed on the private pain of the victim, and we, as viewers, are his guilty accomplices, unable to stop staring at the image, much less ignore it. Our voyeuristic participation is encouraged by the slice-of-life effect created by such casual details as the arm and flashbulb of another photographer at center. Is he photographing us just as Weegee photographed the policeman and rescue worker?

Weegee's photographs often reveal a devious sense of humor, based on the punning conjunction of images and "found" texts (the latter sometimes became the work's caption or title). One photograph depicts a frankfurter factory engulfed in flames. Between the spray of fire hoses, one can clearly read the advertisement on the building, "Simply Add Boiling Water." At another nocturnal tragedy, Weegee positioned the camera so that a dead body, covered in newspapers, is on the same orthogonal path as a movie marquee advertising the double feature DON'T TURN THEM LOOSE and JOY OF LIVING.

Weegee's unflinching approach to brutality and suffering may be in part explained by his own experience. As a child, Weegee (born Usher Fellig, which he later changed to Arthur Fellig) emigrated with his family from Austria to the United States, where they lived in a cold-water tenement on the Lower East Side. The teenage Fellig quit school and left home, taking odd jobs to support himself, and sleeping in parks, flophouses, or train stations. He regarded the down-and-out citizens of New York as his peers. Unlike other photographers in the 1940s, he never photographed them to raise awareness of urban poverty or inspire social reform; rather, they typify the cast of characters he encountered while living on the Lower East Side.

Weegee's photographic style was determined by a technique he developed to accommodate the quick action required by his subject matter. He would preset his 4 x 5 Speed Graphic camera with a Graflex-synchronized flash to 1/200 of a second, the aperture stopped down to f16, and then lie in wait, about ten feet from the action, for his "moment." The settings were predetermined to arrest split-second motion, intensify sharpness, and maximize contrast. The flashbulb highlighted and flattened the center of the image; the edges, due to the short range of the flashbulb's illumination, faded into an impenetrable black. To maximize the theatricality of images destined for newspaper reproduction, Weegee treated the developed print merely as a starting point. He would often enlarge or crop it to edit out extraneous elements. Since subtle gradations of tonality are often lost in newsprint, he made a virtue of this technical deficit by using high-contrast paper that kept his blacks deep and toneless and by carefully burning in details.

The name Weegee, in the explanation most often cited and preferred by the photographer, derives from the phonetic spelling of "Ouija," a board game in vogue during the 1940s, in which a spiritual force prophesies events. Weegee seemed to have an almost prophetic ability to appear at the scene of a crime or fire just moments after it occurred. In fact, the truth is more prosaic: he had rented a room near police headquarters, from which vantage he was able to pick up emergency signals on his own radio. Later in his career, he was granted a license to install a police radio in his car, cutting his reaction time even further. In order to get his images and captions to the newspapers before other photographers, Weegee kept a typewriter in his car. "My car

became my home. It was a two-seater, with a special extra-large luggage compartment. I kept everything in there, an extra camera, cases of flash bulbs, extra loaded holders, a typewriter, fireman's boots, boxes of cigars, salami, infra-red film for shooting in the dark, uniforms, disguises, a change of underwear, and extra shoes and socks."[1] Some of this equipment can be discerned in the photograph I TYPED MY OWN CAPTIONS FOR MY PICTURES.

Weegee's works and creative process are well documented, in both written and photographic form—in large part due to the artist's own self-promotion. After the success of his 1945 book of New York photographs, NAKED CITY, Weegee became as renowned for his splashy personality as for his images. Yet it is his gritty style and merciless portrayal of urban life that influenced later photographers—among them William Klein, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Larry Clark—and continues to fascinate us today.

The majority of the works presented in this exhibition were included in the BBC documentary WEEGEE'S WIDOW, in which Weegee's longtime companion, Wilma Wilcox, recounts her memories of Weegee and his images. These photographs have been given to the Whitney Museum through the efforts of the film's executive producer, Aaron Richard Golub, and the generosity of Denise Rich.

—**Dana Miller**, Senior Curatorial Assistant

1. Weegee, **Weegee by Weegee: An Autobiography** (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1961), p. 52.

outside left to right: Untitled (Simply Add Boiling Water), 1937; Untitled (Charles Sodokoff and Arthur Webber Use Their Top Hats to Hide Their Faces), 1942; This Man Covered Up with Newspapers Was Killed in an Auto Accident. The Driver of the Car Was Arrested, But He Put Up Such a Terrific Battle...Cops Had to Put Handcuffs on Him. (Untitled [Joy of Living]), 1942 inside left to right: I Typed My Own Captions for My Pictures (Untitled [Weegee at His Typewriter in the Trunk of His 1938 'Chevy,' c. 1943]), c. 1943; ...and the Human Cop (The Human Cop), 1943; I Cried When I Took This Picture (Tragedy), 1939

Photograph credits: Weegee (Arthur Fellig)©1994, reproduced with permission of the International Center of Photography, New York

This publication is made possible through the generosity of Aaron Richard Golub.

# WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are gelatin silver prints by Weegee (Arthur Fellig) (1899–1968). Except where noted, they are in the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art and have been accessioned as Gift of Denise Rich. The accession number appears at the end of each entry. Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters; height precedes width.

Member of Murder Inc. Got the Chair (Untitled (Barber Confesses to Murder of Einer Sporrer)), 1937
6 7/8 x 8 3/8 (17.5 x 21.3)
96.90.7

Untitled (Simply Add Boiling Water), 1937
10 15/16 x 10 1/2 (27.8 x 26.7)
96.90.10

I Cried When I Took This Picture (Tragedy), 1939
10 1/2 x 13 7/16 (26.7 x 34.1)
96.90.5

Murder Was My Business (Untitled (Check for Two Murders)), c. 1939
10 1/2 x 13 3/8 (26.7 x 34)
96.90.11

Variant of This Boy Was Arrested for Dressing Like a Girl, c. 1939
13 1/2 x 11 (34.3 x 27.9)
Collection of
Aaron Richard Golub

Sardines (Untitled (Crowd at Coney Island, Temperature 89 Degrees...They Came Early, and Stayed Late)), 1940
7 7/16 x 9 7/16 (18.9 x 24)
96.90.1

Variant of Untitled (Striking Beauty), 1940
13 3/8 x 10 3/16 (34 x 25.9)
96.90.14

Murder in Hell's Kitchen. One Looks Out of the Windows...Talks About the Weather with a Neighbor...Or Looks at a Murder., c. 1940
10 3/4 x 14 (27.3 x 35.6)
Collection of
Aaron Richard Golub

Untitled (Man Sleeping in Basement), c. 1940
9 1/2 x 12 (24.1 x 30.5)
96.90.16

Untitled (Self-Portrait Inside Paddy Wagon (My Studio)), c. 1940
9 7/16 x 7 7/16 (24 x 18.9)
96.90.9

Variant of Slum Clearance Project—Hell's Kitchen, c. 1940
10 7/16 x 13 5/16 (26.5 x 33.8)
96.90.4

Untitled (Bandit), 1941
10 7/16 x 13 3/16 (26.5 x 33.5)
96.90.3

A Passing Priest Gives the Injured Man the Last Rites of the Church (Untitled (Last Rites)), 1942
10 5/8 x 13 5/16 (27 x 33.8)
96.90.15

This Man Covered Up with Newspapers Was Killed in an Auto Accident. The Driver of the Car Was Arrested, But He Put Up Such a Terrific Battle...Cops Had to Put Handcuffs on Him. (Untitled (Joy of Living)), 1942
9 1/2 x 7 3/8 (24.1 x 18.7)
96.90.17

Untitled (Charles Sodokoff and Arthur Webber Use Their Top Hats to Hide Their Faces), 1942
7 9/16 x 9 1/2 (19.2 x 24.1)
96.90.12

...and the Human Cop (The Human Cop), 1943
11 3/4 x 9 1/2 (29.8 x 24.1)
96.90.8

The Critic, 1943
10 1/2 x 12 1/2 (26.7 x 31.8)
96.90.2

Shorty, the Bowery Cherub, Welcomed the New Year..., 1943
13 3/4 x 10 1/2 (34.9 x 26.7)
Promised gift of
Aaron Richard Golub

I Typed My Own Captions for My Pictures (Untitled (Weegee at His Typewriter in the Trunk of His 1938 'Chevy,' c. 1943)), c. 1943
9 7/16 x 7 7/16 (24 x 18.9)
96.90.13

The Cocktail Hour, 1940s
11 x 13 7/8 (27.9 x 35.2)
Collection of
Aaron Richard Golub

The Spirits of Saint Louis (Drunk in the Bowery), 1940s
7 3/4 x 9 3/4 (19.7 x 24.8)
Collection of
Aaron Richard Golub

Untitled (Man Walking with Armful of Clothes), 1940s
9 5/16 x 7 7/16 (23.7 x 18.9)
96.90.6

Untitled (Weegee in Holding Cell), c. 1950
7 5/8 x 9 7/16 (19.4 x 24)
96.90.18

L.S.D., n.d.
7 3/4 x 9 1/2 (19.7 x 24.1)
Collection of
Aaron Richard Golub

Untitled (Not a Sunday Driver), n.d.
10 13/16 x 13 3/8 (27.5 x 34)
Gift of Raymond W. Merritt Jr.
96.278.3